

Agenda packs organizational punch

When a manager is inundated with numbers, he will likely try to tame that torrent with a computer spreadsheet program.

But when a manager is awash with words — memos, product updates, to-do lists, Rolodex cards and even sticky yellow notes — a different strategy and a different type of software are called for.

Lotus Agenda is a unique \$395 program that packs extraordinary organizational power. It is published by Lotus Development Corp., the same people that introduced the extraordinarily popular spreadsheet program 1-2-3.

Agenda assumes the information you're tracking will start out as free-form and varied — snippets of meeting conversations, press releases, changes in regulations, construction deadlines. Whatever the source, the information should be quickly typed in, copied from external files or downloaded by modem without regard to structure.

Like a backward data base program, you can impose structure on data in Agenda after you've en-



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tered it. Because you don't always know beforehand what data you'll be entering, this approach allows immense flexibility in analyzing information. Agenda gives you an arsenal of tools — categories, views, profiles, conditions, filters — for adding structure only as necessary.

Here are some of the components that make up any Agenda application:

■ **Items.** These are the raw, unstructured text — phrases, thoughts, clippings, lists — that are initially entered free-form into Agenda. While an item has a limit of about four lines, any item can have a note of up to seven typewritten pages attached to it.

■ **Categories.** At some point you'll want to begin assigning items to categories. At first you'll

do this manually, but as you teach Agenda about the relationships of your data, the program will parse the contents of items — new and old — and make assignments automatically.

■ **Views.** This feature sets Agenda apart from similar programs. A view “slices” through the seemingly unrelated tidbits and chunks of information to create meaningful ad hoc relationships. The formats of a view are completely flexible; they can be columns or sections, divided vertically or horizontally. The same information can reappear in different contexts as multiple views are created.

Using Agenda is relatively easy, once you grasp how its components interact. Function keys, help screens and “Lotus-like” menus keep you from fumbling through the two-volume owner's manual — for a while, at least. For the advanced user, there is a built-in programming language that unleashes even more power from Agenda.

Agenda has proved such a powerful tool for harnessing complex

projects that an industry has cropped up offering enhanced products.

On the downside, Agenda is a fairly complicated program and it is not memory-resident. Not having the ability to “pop up” over other programs limits its usefulness for entering “on-the-fly” information.

■ **The Bottom Line:** Lotus Agenda attempts to be for words and text what Lotus's flagship product, 1-2-3, is to numbers. Like 1-2-3, it requires some dedication to master the basics, but with its inherent power and flexibility, you're not likely to outgrow its features soon.

I don't recommend this program as a simple desk organizer. But it should certainly be considered by advanced users who need help in organizing large projects.

Lotus is located at 55 Cambridge Parkway, Cambridge, Mass. 02142, or call (617) 577-8500.

Hillel Segal's weekly column evaluates gadgets, small-computer hardware and software, seminars, and books designed to enhance business productivity.